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CULTURE OF REFORM

AND REFORM OF CULTURE

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May God guide us towards the right path.

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Reform is a societal issue of general interest since it does not affect individuals or specific groups of people but society as a whole. It is an all-encompassing and holistic process, unconfined within a given aspect and touching on all of society's vital fields.

This does not obviate the crucial responsibility that falls to the enlightened elite -intellectuals being at the forefront of this elite- in promoting such reform, and before that in planning and guiding its implementation, satisfying in the process the needs that motivated it initially.

There is no denying that the need for reform is dictated by the nature itself of our Islamic and Arab thought which

underwent different phases. The degree of progress and development achieved during these phases stands witness to this thought's capacity to surmount its current state of isolation and introversion. This need is also motivated by the nature of our religion which urges for innovation, as does the ever-changing reality. Finally, the need for reform is no more than a response to the laws of nature and life which reject immobility and stagnation.

However, it is important to remember that many difficulties stand in the way of this reform, including:

1- The buildup and aggravation of problems, rendering solution identification difficult at a time when they are either tackled lightly and with poor judgement of their true dangers or as overwhelming obstacles, the result being either neglecting

these problems and allowing them to aggravate, or failing to find any solutions.

2- The absence of a clear and all-encompassing vision that takes into consideration a global reform process that would primarily determine the model to be followed and emulated. Should it be inspired by heritage? Or will it follow the model of the advanced West?

3- Another aggravating factor is the position taken by the West vis-à-vis reform movements as it politically and intellectually monitors the conditions of Arabs and Muslims. However, perusing the writings of Westerners who dedicated their time and effort to monitor these conditions for more than two centuries helps us understand the truth behind the policies adopted by Western countries as they strived to lay claim to and control

Arab and Muslim societies, and shed clarity on the methods used to further these societies' political, economic and military dependence. All these factors heighten Western hegemony and further weaken these societies with many ruses used to aggravate this weakness, including enticing Arab and Muslim competencies to immigrate from their countries of origin, depriving the latter of their key role-players.

4- Add to these difficulties, which are only compounded by ignorance, illiteracy and the widespread poverty, the absence of a strong and genuine will for reform.

5- To refer once again to the role of intellectuals, we believe that reforms cannot become a reality applicable to all levels as long as they are driven by individual movements even though it is

individuals who carry the responsibility of conceptualizing and planning these reforms.

6- Reforms cannot become a reality without espousing the culture of modern times, including renewable technologies and digital knowledge, and without encouraging scientific research, inventions and other diverse forms of innovation, and creating an outstanding capital of innovation and quality.

The culture of modern times, in addition to entailing the acquisition of a wealth of knowledge, represents also awareness, vision and moral values. In this regard, and particularly with respect to values, it is important to acknowledge that this culture itself suffers from great instability and anxiety, not to say upheavals. Such situation has led analysts

to raise many questions about the cultural reality in Arab and Islamic countries, and even in Western ones, on the evolution of this reality in an ever- changing world, as well as on the motives behind its reform.

These factors are in fact many and evident, and awareness of them began about two centuries ago, along with the first stirrings of modern times. But for Arab and Islamic countries, these motives reflect a desire to re-examine general conditions and overcome the poverty, ignorance, illiteracy that cripple them and relegate them to last position in the world's race for progress. They translate their desire to catch up with this march, appropriate the achievements made in the political, economic, social and cultural fields, and to sample the wellbeing, freedoms and rights enjoyed by the rest of

the world and that enable them to better discharge the obligations.

It is important here to refresh minds about all the potentialities of the Arab and Islamic world, namely the size of its population, its abundant resources and its strategic location, as well as its eminent competencies, whether resident or immigrant, and financial capacities that are conducive to investments within and outside these countries.

The question comes to mind: where then does the flaw lie?

Arabs and Muslims have been exposed to several upheavals, starting with the successive conflicts of the first era of Islam that negatively impacted on the state and society, and on to Hulaku's invasion, the Crusades, the eviction of Muslims from Andalusia, and colonialism and the post-

independence challenges. Today, they continue to endure a number of crises related to the occupation of Palestine and the Iraqi issue, as well as other crises of which the repercussions are hard to fathom, particularly at this juncture of sudden uprisings unfolding in many Arab countries and which I will address at a later stage in this article.

To correctly answer the question about the flaw, we are required to engage in an exercise of self-criticism during which we acknowledge our state of backwardness and explore the exact causes that have culminated in this state. Should we manage to do so, we will come to realize that one of these factors is our own introversion, our blind attachment to obsolete traditions that have shaped a rigid mindset and closed doors and windows before anything

that could guarantee some openness onto the outside world.

This isolationism was military, political and economic at first, but its dangers became more manifest when it affected the cultural dimension which could not stand up to it despite its resistance and despite all the merits of the reform movements led by the Salafist thought in the Maghreb and the Mashreq, or by vanguard modernists from the same countries. These modernists had the opportunity, from as early as the 19th century, of experiencing first hand the West's achievements and nurtured the desire of emulating some of their aspects were it not for internal obstacles that prevented their efforts from bearing fruit.

This isolationism worsened and its dangers further aggravated after colonial powers laid claim to Arab and Muslim

lands, the result being a return to the source and a desire to revive heritage as a natural and legitimate way of resisting colonialism.

After independence, Arab and Islamic thought strived to master development tools and attain the same progress and advancement achieved by the West, although the isolationist trend continued to thrive and influence this élan. Along with this, the old new question persisted about the true reasons behind this back-wardness as addressed from various angles.

Does the reason lie in Islam or in its application? Could it be the Muslims' abandon of Islamic values and their inability to keep pace with advanced countries? Is it their failure to reconcile religion with the new prerequisites of worldly life? Is it their particular attention

to and divergence about specifics at the expense of essence, and therefore in their adoption of obsolete points of reference and their unsuitable texts?

This sums up in the surrender of all that is scientific and the primacy of the mythological thought with all the charlatanism it involves. This situation is further compounded by the nature of the regimes operating in most Arab and Islamic states based on tyranny, the lack of shura and democracy, private acquisition of public resources and failure to develop them to the benefit of all and to achieve the Ummah's aspirations for growth and progress. Last but not least is the persecution of Islam and Muslims by the Others and their keenness to preserve this state of backwardness in order to serve colonial designs.

Another question rises in this regard: Why have Muslims succeeded in the past and are unable to do so now?

A reading in history will bring us to the conclusion that in the past Muslims had true respect for the value of knowledge. As a result, they pursued knowledge, research and writing with great inventiveness, creating in the process an enlightened, open and prosperous culture that touched on all fields of life. They were cognizant of the importance of translating the works of the others and hastened to render them into Arabic, in all freedom and hindered in their march by no complexes. In doing so, they, and by that we mean their scholars, accomplished with a flourish the mission entrusted to them.

This is what we are missing today as our scholars, thinkers and intellectuals in

general shirk this responsibility and that mission and become -in most cases- unconcerned spectators or avid pursuers of private gain. They have lost their positions which do not abide indifference and ceased to observe the conditions of their societies as a way of analyzing crises and finding solutions. Free rein was given to pseudo-scholars to the ignorant and to those who peddle sensational slogans to keep public opinion occupied and who are inspired by an ideological discourse where knowledge or justice have no place, or by a radical or superseded religious discourse that the 9/11 events have fuelled further. We threw the gates wide open before an onslaught on Muslims motivated by claims that Islam condones and encourages terrorism. Most of these have a perverted perception of religion and are propelled towards these misconceptions by an abysmal social

reality. Alternatively, their existence is the consequence of a cumulus of colonial remnants and they as a result harbour nostalgic feelings for that era and collaborate in the execution of plots that colonialism resorted to in order to maintain its presence and hegemony, starting with the kindling of ethnic and linguistic strife, to political and sectarian conflicts and other conflicts where personal interests clash.

Modern reformist thought has tackled some issues perceived as essential for the achievement of progress. One of these is the relationship between religion and politics and the extent of the relationship between religion, extremism and terrorism. After focusing -and it is still focused- on the equation of tradition versus modernism and the ensuing debate on modernity, it split into left, right and centre, with each

orientation housing groups and currents that generate transient issues such as the dialogue and clash or alliance of civilizations, with special emphasis placed on the need to highlight the tolerance of religion and its capacity for dialogue and alliance and for embracing democracy.

Unfortunately, engaging in such occupations has taken place within an atmosphere devoid of the freedom necessary to create a knowledge environment and encourage creativity, and lacking in the scientific and technological aspect and tools of progress thanks to which the West achieved excellence. Such pursuits have failed to take into consideration globalization requirements and the possibility of adapting these to the Arab and Islamic reality with all its heritage components, current preoccupations and future aspirations

while confronting the challenges and assaults of this globalization, and assimilating its negative aspects, be it at the economic level or at the cultural one which is associated with the identity that shapes a cultural specificity that is often perceived as static.

In the Arab and Islamic world, we speak of democracy and of the need to espouse it in order to overcome our regression. We also strive to create democratic systems, apparatuses and institutions. Yet, we continue to lack the content relevant to this, namely democratic values and awareness thereof within society, as well as the need to be imbued with such values and reflect them in actions. Our actions must be motivated by the acceptance and respect of the other as well as positive dialogue and an interaction where no room is left for selfishness and

for hegemonic desires seeking to impose a single opinion at the expense of any other; these all necessitate a metamorphosis of mindset and mentality.

If the West has evolved politically, economically and militarily, it has also evolved culturally and technologically, and before that mentally. It is the latter evolution that entitled it to access the realms of excellence and distinction where free rein is given to the potentialities, where the individuals are bypassed for the benefit of society with all its structures and components while fostering in them an appreciation for the importance of mutual acquaintance, solidarity, alliance and cooperation via common human values that do not clash with religious values in their essence.

It is from this perspective of values that we must approach the phenomenon of globalization as the new framework regulating international relations and, as it is meant to be, synonymous with westernization. Most often, it is perceived as a mixed bag and seen from a one-dimensional angle that imposes specific and uncompromising concepts.

Globalization has indeed given rise to a transformation in concepts and plans and in the visions and theories that govern them. This leads us to wonder about the extent of this globalization's dominance, tyranny or hegemony, its ability to dwarf the role of individuals, civil society and even states, as well as about the range of its impact on the cultural dimension of peoples, obviating any illusions of diversity and plurality in the world of culture. This in turn brings to mind another

more profound question on the common or dividing boundaries in these fields and the possibility of the existence of a minimum threshold for a human culture with unified values, particularly since fear of globalization has become a common denominator to all peoples, whether advanced or underdeveloped, wishing to protect their cultural specificity.

Arabs and Muslims are not alone in this world. They are part of a whole and they share its advantages and inconveniences. They share its concerns, instability, confrontations, clashes, constants and turpitudes, and suffer the same hegemony of superpowers that control or seek to control this world.

In the midst of the world's rough winds, Arabs and Muslims need to know themselves, not through the eyes of the

other because such perspective cannot be devoid of interests as experience has shown, but through their own eyes, in all objectivity and fidelity. They need to grasp, highlight and enrich their points of strength, and understand their weaknesses in order to avoid their pitfalls, all the while respecting the international standards agreed upon by advanced societies as a means of regulating the lives of individuals and societies.

In light of this commitment and its inherent reform drive geared at catching up with the march of progress, the Arab Islamic thought needs, after a process of criticism, to open up onto the Other through all channels, starting with acquiring the mechanisms of scientific research and excelling at it, and on to translation where there are unfortunately great inadequacies, whether from foreign

languages into Arabic or from the latter into foreign languages. This requires the creation of serious institutions that would have the advantage of working freely and in all responsibility.

Additionally, attempting to catch up with the pace of progress requires fast-paced endeavours to keep abreast of any developments in the world, of the progress, prosperity and supremacy unfolding around this world at a time when countries -with the United States of America leading the pack- are determined to change the political, economic, social, cultural and geographical also status as well as frontiers in the Arab and Islamic world to better suit their own vision. This vision hides behind slogans of democracy, freedom and globalization, occulting the true intended exploitation, hegemony and interest serving. In reality, the United States of

America is either aware or unaware of the contradictions it is swimming in, of the problems and crises facing it and before which it remains powerless as in Iran, Iraq, the Sudan, Palestine, Afghanistan and other hotspots of tension.

In the midst of these fluctuations and the tug of war that characterizes them, the world is taken aback by an unprecedented eruption that has taken shape in youth uprisings in some Arab countries throughout the first half of this year. These uprisings started with Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and spread to Syria, a development that denotes a new consciousness of what has been missing in the past, as indicated earlier. Some of its positive aspects became manifest in Morocco where a wise leadership has hastened to conduct a series of crucial reforms.

This awareness has revealed the degree of discontent and rebellion against the corrupt conditions endured by these peoples. In this nightmare of repression, they are deprived of their most basic rights from freedom to social justice and such legitimate and essential demands as the right to employment, and to a life in dignity and safety. Through this overwhelming surge, the Arab world has expressed its profound desire for change, for uprooting all forms of corruption and all laws and processes inherent to this corruption regardless of the dangers and difficulties associated with such a sudden and shocking eruption. The Arab world has lost faith in the different existing political and security institutions which it now perceives as mere facades for the ruling regimes, a means to sustain their political corruption, with all the tyranny and

repression inherent to such acts, the usurpation of public wealth and the violation of the rights of citizens.

It is doubtless that these dangers and difficulties, which resurge and accrue in complexity in tandem with the waves of daily protests, along with what has become possible thanks to modern communication and information technologies, require that we engage in a profound cultural reflection. Free from any ideological influences, such reflection would facilitate an objective analysis and an honest reality check as a first step towards finding solutions that would cut losses, particularly at the economic and social levels. This would apply to the transitional period and its intrinsic problems and challenges, the most dangerous of which would be events that could rekindle the question of the

uprising itself in terms of causes and the objectives that gave it momentum.

Such ponderings cannot be made by those who empty drone slogans, nor by those hiding behind the banners of economic and technological development such as the technocrats and businessmen who play an executive role. Nor can it be carried out by the pseudo-intellectuals and the parasites who ride any wave, those with the mental and behavioural predisposition to alter their positions to better serve personal interests. And riding the same boat are the desperate intellectuals who have withdrawn and shut themselves out to the world.

We can add to these all the troublemakers who believe their actions to be creative chaos, as well as all those who fuel tension and trouble in order to hinder anything that

may result in reform, those who make every effort to block this dynamic and deviate it from its course by spreading immorality, promoting corrupt taste and behaviour and high-jacking any achievements made or the promising signs of success that kindle hope for reforms and for progress towards a better future.

Those qualified to lead this process of reflection are the intellectuals who are capable, through their creativity, thoughts, positions and moral rectitude, of embarking on such arduous quest, laying the foundations of a new societal project built around the legitimacy of institutions, but first of all on finding a solution for the current social problems which can no longer wait for a theoretical reform of the systems of principles and rules. This project is also built around values that combine the traditional with the modern

within a context that fulfils aspirations for global development and therefore responds to the concerns and ambitions of the people and their dreams of a better life. In such way, it brings about a serene and transparent social entente that shuns any form of conflict, including the clash of generations, and is compatible with the positive facets of globalization.

What is traditional and authentic may lead us to address the Islamic frame of reference. The link between this frame of reference and the religious versus civil state, addressed within the context of this reform drive, has triggered a fierce debate. This reference does not run counter to the creation of a civil state although it does reject the religious state in the theocratic sense that associates the act of ruling with divine right and prerogative, or that is wrongfully associated with this frame of

reference under the misconception that equates it with a backward and extremist political Islam. Indeed, Islam has brought general texts that serve more as basic guidelines that Muslims need to ponder, endeavour to understand and apply in ways that suit their reality as it evolves and changes with time and space. The most important part of this ever-changing reality is the one pertaining to politics and to the governance of public affairs.

Unfortunately, many of those who claim attachment to this frame of reference seem unable to come up with a new political Islamic discourse, a clear modern vision that takes into consideration the rapid changes and strives to find solutions for the ever-worsening economic and social problems.

This sought-after cultural goal may help restore self-confidence and reinvigorate the capacity to seek reform, i.e. to confront corruption in its two most obvious manifestations, the culture of corruption and the corruption of culture, using both the religious and the material dimensions of this culture. This would mean fulfilling this reform within the framework of the legitimacy of laws, rights and obligations, in such a way as to diffuse tension and its causes, stop the haemorrhaging and provide encouraging alternatives that are likely to restore peace and stability for individuals, society and the State, and preserve the prestige and augustness without which no State can exist.

This great civilizational project cannot become a reality unless we lay down solid foundations of strong and effective policies

that could help us find propitious solutions for the problems of social reality, whether in education, health, justice, employment or the governance of local and general affairs, and that can efficiently confront all crises, genuine or fabricated alike. This would enable culture to recover its spirit with creativity and efficiency, and intellectuals to reclaim their responsible role within society.

It thus becomes necessary to raise the key question of this role, at present and in the future, and whether it is capable of solving the dilemmas of the current juncture, and shape a new school of thought capable of facing its challenges and finding the appropriate solutions for ensuing crises.